



EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP

[Home](#)
[Current Issue](#)
[Archives](#)
[Buy](#)
[Contact](#)

May 2017 | Volume **74** | Number **8**

Lifting School Leaders Pages 32-36

[Issue Table of Contents](#) | [Read Article Abstract](#)

Leadership Coaching that Transforms

Elena Aguilar

Coaching that explores underlying beliefs can help a principal flourish in a challenging school situation.

The first time I met Richard (a pseudonym), a principal in an urban high school in California, I asked why he was interested in working with a leadership coach. His response was one I've heard from every principal I've coached: "This job is so lonely. I don't have anyone I can really talk to."

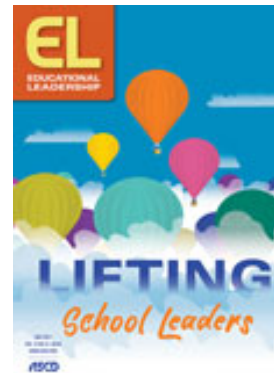
The desire to continue learning also fueled Richard's interest. Toward the end of his third year as a principal, student performance was rising and Richard had received strong evaluations, but he wanted to keep improving. "I know I can be a better principal," he said, "but I'm not sure how. Our district's monthly PD isn't helpful."

As we talked, Richard revealed a third impetus for finding a coach. Richard is an African American man from Baltimore, his teaching staff is predominantly white, and 85 percent of the students at his school are black. Richard explained how he experienced these dynamics:

At the end of my first year, I received feedback from teachers that seemed to say, "You are too loud and intense." A few comments alluded to my anger or said that I could be cold and uncaring. In my second year, I worked on toning myself down, smiling a lot more, and talking slowly. Staff feedback at the end of that year was better, and my boss was pleased. But now this doesn't feel right. Sometimes I see myself leading a staff meeting, and I don't recognize that man. I go to school and feel like I have to put on a costume to hide my blackness. I love my school, but I don't know if I can keep doing this.

The factors that compelled Richard to seek out a coach reflect the reasons all school leaders need and deserve coaches. Principals need a neutral outsider with whom they can talk confidentially; they need job-embedded, differentiated professional development; and they need a safe space to explore the identity questions that are often at the forefront of internal and external conflicts inherent in their roles.

Districts and education organizations seeking to improve principals' performance and reduce turnover—particularly those that want to hire and keep more leaders of color—could go a long way toward those goals by offering leadership coaching. Let's explore what kind of coaching best serves principals, drawing on Richard's story.



BUY THIS ISSUE

Four Considerations for Leadership Coaching

To launch an effective leadership coaching program, administrators must consider four key features. First, before even looking into hiring coaches, district leaders should create a comprehensive description of their coaching program that includes a vision for this type of training, specific goals, and criteria for effective coaching. Different coaching models embrace different overall goals and methods. Both coaches and coachees struggle when these elements of the coaching program haven't been articulated.

Second, if coaching is launched as a vehicle for professional development, it must not be connected to supervision in any way. The coach must not evaluate the principal and, ideally, should have little to no contact with the principal's supervisor. The need for trust between coach and coachee cannot be overestimated. If the lines between coaching and evaluation are blurry, trust will be fragile or nonexistent.

Third, realize that a coach isn't a mentor. A new principal can benefit from having a mentor—a colleague who shares stories and experiences, provides suggestions to navigate the system, and offers technical help—but may also need a coach. Coaching is more formal than mentorship. Most important, a good coach is an expert in facilitating another adult's learning process.

Fourth, coaches themselves need training. Coaching is a form of professional development that requires, above all, deep, specialized knowledge of how to facilitate adult learning. A good coach has an extensive set of skills. This specialization merits the kind of in-depth learning and training teachers receive (or should receive) before teaching. A leadership coach doesn't necessarily need to have been a principal, but experience in a leadership role is crucial, as is strong knowledge of instruction, organizational development and systems change, group dynamics, emotional intelligence, cultural competency, and leadership in general.

Unfortunately, there are few programs that prepare leaders or coaches in these areas. Although a district should hire coaches who have knowledge about some of these domains, it's of utmost importance that coaches participate in their own meaningful, rigorous PD so they can continue to build their knowledge.

What Helps Coaches Do Their Best?

Make It Voluntary

Let's return to Richard's experience to explore some ways a leadership coach can work effectively with a principal—and conditions that help make this happen. In the initial phase of coaching, my job was to get to know Richard. Over several weeks, I observed him leading a staff meeting, facilitating PD, debriefing a teacher observation, walking around school at lunchtime, and interacting with parents. I read his previous evaluations as well as the end-of-year staff feedback. And I engaged Richard in many conversations, during which I asked a handful of questions and listened a great deal.

One thing that helped was that Richard *wanted* a coach and was eager to grow. He invited me to challenge him and push his thinking. Ideally, coaching is offered to the willing. Coaching leaders who don't want to be coached is another story. But when coaching is offered as a means for growth and separated from evaluation, it's not hard to find principals who want to sign up.

Let Leaders Set Their Own Goals

As my understanding of Richard grew, we moved toward determining a focus for our work. Coaching needs to be anchored in a set of goals or an area for inquiry. Goals could be aligned to professional standards or an evaluation

tool if that feels authentic to the leader. Whatever goals are chosen, it's essential that the person being coached feels intrinsically motivated to pursue those goals. Richard chose to focus our coaching on these inquiry questions:

How can I feel like myself as an African American man leading a predominantly white staff?

How can I develop my staff's cultural competency?

How can I compassionately lead for equity?

To explore these questions, Richard and I developed an action plan that included surveying and interviewing teachers and staff members. Some of the data we collected landed with a thud, such as a young, white, female teacher's comment that "I feel nervous when I'm in a room alone with you because sometimes you just seem so angry and I'm not sure what you'll do." During this interview, at which I was present, Richard stayed remarkably calm. He thanked the teacher for her honesty. I noticed his hand trembling as he took notes, however, and later, this was where we started our conversation.

Protect Conversation

Coaching happens in conversation. This is when the coach artfully employs a set of strategies to prompt learning and when the principal settles into reflection. It's absolutely essential that the school leader have protected, uninterrupted time with his or her coach.

Ensuring that these conditions are in place takes proactive strategizing. When Richard had a coaching session, the staff was informed that the dean was the first responder on duty. Richard hung a sign on his door that said, "Interrupt me only if the school is burning down." We were never interrupted.

Transformational Coaching

The coaching model I have developed and use is called *transformational coaching*. This approach holds that effective leadership coaching addresses and explores the *behaviors* the school leader needs to do well (such as leading a staff meeting, analyzing data, and observing a lesson), the *beliefs* (about learning, leadership, equity, and so on) from which that leader operates, and his or her *ways of being*, which includes the leader's identity, ways of communicating, and emotions.

I call this "coaching the three Bs"—behaviors, beliefs, and being. Many coaching models focus exclusively on behaviors. But without exploring the beliefs from which those behaviors emerge or how those beliefs are expressed through a leader's way of being, the impact of coaching is limited. Leaders who are working in diverse contexts need a coaching model that openly explores beliefs, identities, emotions, and ways of communicating because they are confronted daily by the perspectives of many different stakeholders and by a wide range of ways of being. And a district that intends to create equitable schools needs to use a transformational model because disrupting inequities will require exploring varying beliefs and ways of being.

Exploring Difficult Emotions

At different points in a coaching conversation, it may be most important to explore either behaviors, beliefs, or ways of being. When Richard and I sat down to debrief the interviews that included the one in which the teacher confessed she felt nervous around him, I opened the conversation by asking where he wanted to start. Richard gazed out the window and responded in a flat tone, "I guess we should analyze the data for trends."

I paused, then said, "I'm not hearing a lot of enthusiasm in your voice. Are you sure about that?"

He sighed. "I'm trying to let [the teacher's] comment go."

I paused again. Holding silence is a valuable coaching skill. Richard continued, "I mean, really? *She's not sure what do?*" He shook his head.

I realized that I needed to help Richard explore his emotions, part of his way of being. "Tell me more about what you're thinking or feeling," I said.

"I am angry," Richard answered. "Even in this moment I'm so angry, and I'm wondering if I make you scared."

"You don't." When coaching, I'm intentional about being a calm and grounded presence, conveying that calm through my body language, tone of voice, pitch, and pace of talking. "What else is going through your mind?"

Richard then spoke for 10 minutes, describing what it felt like to lead his predominantly white staff, how he didn't feel seen for who he really was, but only as an African American man distorted by our society's dominant perceptions of African American men. "It's a dehumanizing experience," he said, his voice constricting. "And then I'm expected to take care of *their* emotions, to make *them* feel OK."

I paraphrased what I'd heard: "You have a right, as a human being, to be yourself at school, to be here as a black man and not have to conform to a distortion."

The coaching, at this point, needed to be cathartic, to allow Richard the opportunity to name his emotional experience. Emotional intelligence is key to effective coaching. Coaches must be comfortable in the presence of strong emotions, including anger. With patience, the waves of intense emotion will pass, as they did with Richard. Below anger is often sadness, and a coach must also be comfortable with tears, which sometimes surface.

When Richard was ready, we shifted to talk about what he could do to build his staff's cultural competence. Richard was clear that if some teachers perceived his behaviors as potentially threatening, they were also bound to perceive the behaviors of some African American male students as threatening. The consequences of those perceptions could be seen in the disproportionately high numbers of African American male students sent to the office for "defiance." We had moved into the territory of beliefs (the teachers' beliefs and Richard's) and behavior.

By the end of this coaching session, Richard had expanded his plan for building cultural competency. This plan included engaging staff in reading key texts, inviting parents to participate on a panel discussion about their experiences in school, and organizing affinity groups in which staff could speak with one another about how their cultural background influenced how they engaged with students of other backgrounds. More important, he felt renewed and reenergized. As we wrapped up, I asked him what he'd learned in our conversation that day. He responded,

Truthfully, when [the teacher] said I scared her, I wanted to just quit. Now, I'm grateful she said that because it pushed me to address the perception of black males at our school. I'm grateful that I could debrief with you. I can see my areas for growth as a principal even more clearly, and I have a plan to build my teachers' skills. What hurt has made me stronger, although I don't know if that would've happened had I not had a coach.

Support that Makes the Difference

Most of the principals whom I've coached over the last 10 years have been people of color. Together, we've worked on refining the behaviors that their role requires of them, but more often, we've worked in the territory of beliefs and ways of being. We've explored what it means to be a leader of color in schools full of black and brown children and of how gender and class background intersect with racial identity markers, making some aspects of leadership tricky.

Whether the leader led a diverse staff or a homogenous staff that was from a different racial/ethnic background than the leader, what's been universal is leaders' need for a safe, confidential space where they could talk about

the complexities of their role—complexities that often had the leader's core identity at the center. Many white principals I've coached (who often led schools full of students of color) had a similar need to explore their identities.

These leaders all worked in organizations that voiced a commitment to hiring and retaining culturally competent leaders and leaders of color. The factor that made the difference between whether these principals stayed at the schools for many years or left after a year or two was whether or not they had support, meaning someone nonjudgmental with whom they could talk regularly, often a coach.

Leadership coaching in schools is in a nascent phase. Although instructional coaching is widespread, coaching for school and central office leaders has been slow to take root. But the kind of transformational coaching program I've described can have tremendous benefits for both leaders and students—and is especially helpful for districts committed to interrupting educational inequities and reducing leader turnover. It's essential for districts that aspire to implement such coaching to clearly articulate their vision and goals for the program, train coaches extensively, and gather data on the program's effects.

The Rest of Richard's Story

Three years have passed since I met Richard. He still leads the same school, and I'm still coaching him. When I asked Richard recently what he valued most about our coaching sessions, he said,

I can just be me for a couple hours when we meet. I can be angry or sad or scared or elated, and you're always OK with it. I am learning more about who I am from coaching. These hours [of coaching] are teaching me more about leadership than anything. They're a break I look forward to all week.

As it has for other principals, I like to think that coaching allowed Richard to keep loving his job, his teachers, his students, and his school—and to keep going.

Readers' Stories

Turning Vulnerability into Ability

As I begin a new leadership role as an assistant principal, I feel such gratitude for the mentorship of my supervisor during my yearlong administrative internship. As an introvert, I was often challenged by the emotions that I bumped into during the change process. There is no doubt that he saw this need within me and coached me to realize my blind side.

The most important task he engaged me in was reflective meaning-making dialogue, giving me the time and space to process the challenges I confronted. Through adept, safe, and thoughtful questioning, he challenged me to get out of my analyst head and into my heart. The emotions this surfaced enabled me to connect with myself and empathize with the broader change process at play I was witnessing with colleagues. I also received feedback that the work I was engaged in was valued and significant.

My mentor awakened me to my vulnerability and helped me to turn it into an ability.

—Laura Bond, assistant principal, East Windsor Regional School District, Hightstown High School, Hightstown, New Jersey

Elena Aguilar (www.elenaaguilar.com) is the author of *The Art of Coaching Teams: Building Resilient Communities That Transform Schools* (Jossey-Bass, 2016) and *The Art of Coaching: Effective Strategies for School Transformation* (Jossey-Bass, 2013). She trains coaches in transformational methods; consults with schools, districts, and organizations; and coaches site leaders in San Francisco, California. Follow her on [Twitter](#).

KEYWORDS

Click on keywords to see similar products:

[coaching and mentoring](#), [culturally responsive teaching](#), [diverse classrooms and schools](#), [principal effectiveness and evaluation](#), [school and district management](#), [audience: administrators](#), [level: k-12](#)

Copyright © 2017 by ASCD

Requesting Permission

- For **photocopy, electronic and online access**, and **republishing requests**, go to the [Copyright Clearance Center](#). Enter the periodical title within the "**Get Permission**" search field.
 - To **translate** this article, contact permissions@ascd.org
-